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(Continued)

"Well, you will if you don't get better right away, sir. I wish I could do something to help. I can only sympathize and encourage the doctor."

"It only came yesterday," said Collie, suddenly drawing the gun from beneath his pillow.

Anne Marshall gazed at the soiled and wrinkled glove with unlighted eyes. Then her quick smile faded. "Oh, now I know! That is the talisman! Come, yesterday? No wonder you sleep better."

Collie answered with a smile. "It isn't just the glove. But would you—I mean, if you were like me, without being educated or anything?"

But Anne Marshall understood him instantly and answered his shyly questioning eyes.

"Indeed I should. If I had half your money I shouldn't waste a minute in learning the mate to that glove. One glove is of absolutely no use, you know."

"This one was—pretty much," sighed Collie. "I was feeling like letting go and not trying to stay any longer just before it came."

"Be still! Don't even think of that. Some one called on me a few days ago. You are a very fortunate young man. Anne Marshall's ambiguity was not altogether displeasing to Collie in that it was not altogether intelligible."

William Stanley Winthrop, sojourning briefly but fashionably in Los Angeles, appeared at the hospital in immaculate cutting flannels. It was several weeks after his sister's last visit home. Winthrop took the convalescent Collie to the Moonstone ranch in his car.

Aunt Eleanor and Walter Stone were at the house. Collie was helped to the guest room. He was much fatigued with the journey. The question in his eyes was answered by Aunt Eleanor. "Louise rode over to the north range today. She should be back now."

Winthrop scarce needed an introduction. That was sufficient for the host and hostess. He was made welcome as he was wherever he went. He had heard a great deal from his sister of the Stone and their beautiful niece, Louise Lacharme. He was enthusiastic about the Moonstone canyon. He grew even more enthusiastic after meeting Louise.

She came riding her black pony Boyar down the afternoon hillside—a picture that he never forgot. Her gray sombrero hung on the saddle horn. Her gloves were tucked in her belt. She had loosened the neck of her blouse and rolled back her sleeves at the spring above to bathe her face and arms in the chill overflow. Her hair shone with a soft golden radiance that was ethereal in the flicker of afternoon sunlight through the live oaks. From her golden head to the tip of her small riding boot she was a harmony of vigor and grace, of exquisite coloring and infinite charm.

"I have been quite curious about you, Mr. Winthrop," she said. "You are quite like Anne. I adore Anne. Shall we turn Boyar into the corral?"

If William Stanley Winthrop had had any idea of making an impression he forgot it. The impression Louise was unconsciously making straightway absorbed his attention.

"Yes, indeed! Turn him into the corral—turn him into anything, Miss Lacharme. You have the magic. Make another admirer of him."

"Thank you, Mr. Winthrop. But Boyar could hardly be improved."

"You trained him, didn't you?" queried Winthrop.

Louise laughed. "Yes. But he was well-bred to begin with."

Then Winthrop ejaculated a mental "Ouch!" Simplicity did not necessarily mean stupidity.

"Do you enjoy mining—the real work—out there in the desert, Mr. Winthrop?"

"I could enjoy anything in company with Louise," he said.

"Of course. Do you think people who have lots of money are apt to be cynical?" she asked.

"Not more so than people without money. But what splendid animals!" he exclaimed as they approached the corral.

"Uncle Walter and I are very fond of them," she said, turning Boyar into the enclosure.

"Do you know, Miss Lacharme, I like horses and dogs and cats, and I just revel in all horses. But animals don't seem to like me. They're rather indifferent to me. I wonder if it is a matter of health, or magnetism, or something of that sort?"

"Oh, no. But it is difficult to explain. Even if you are very fond of animals it doesn't follow that they will like you. That seems rather cold, doesn't it? It's almost unfair."

"Yes, it one considers it seriously."

"Don't you?"

Winthrop gazed at her for a second before replying. "I see I must tell the truth," he said lightly. "You compel it. It does hurt me to have anything or any one that I care for indifferent to me. Perhaps it's because I realize that I am giving affection and selfishly want 'value returned,' so to speak. Pardon me for becoming serious."

"Surely! But I thank you too. See Boyar roll! He's happy. No, he doesn't roll because his back itches. You see, he's sweaty where the saddle covered him. Before he rolled you noticed that he deliberately found a dusty spot. The dust dries the sweat, and he doesn't take cold. That's the real explanation."

"I knew it couldn't be through happiness at leaving you," said Winthrop. "If you are determined to keep it up," said Louise mischievously, "all right. But be careful, sir. I enjoy it. It's been dull—dreadfully dull—since Anne and the doctor left. May I have your knife?"

A belated crimson Colombe rose nodded beneath the guest room window. Louise cut the stem and pinned the flower in the lapel of Winthrop's white flannel coat. He gazed at her intent on her task.

"There!" she said, with a light touch of her supple fingers. "That will do! And slowly her gray eyes lifted to his. The color flooded to his face. His eyes became momentarily brilliant. He drew a deep breath. "You told me to be careful, I shall be," he said, bowing slightly. "Please say something. Your silent attack was a little too—too successful."

"Trace?" she queried, laughing.

"Never," replied Winthrop, "even as our rather maternal and distinctly illustrious friend Overland says. 'Not till me wires are all down and me lights are out.'"

CHAPTER XX.
Rose Girl Overhears All.

COLLIE, standing at the open French window just above them, drew back. Quite naturally, being a young man in love, he misinterpreted all that he had seen and heard. Louise had been away the day he was expected to return to the ranch. She had come back. She was seemingly satisfied with Winthrop's society. She was even more than satisfied; she was flirting with him. An unreasonable, bucolic jealousy, partly due to his condition, overcame Collie's usual serenity. His invalidism magnified the whole affair to absurd proportions.

Perhaps it was the intensity of his gaze that caused Louise to glance up. His expression startled her. His eyes were burning. His face was unnaturally white. He met her glance, but gave no sign of recognition—a rudeness that he regretted even while he manifested it.

Louise turned away proudly, calling Winthrop's attention to a huge garden seat beneath the live oaks. "We have dinner out there quite often," she said, her eyes glowing. "Would you care to rest awhile after your ride?"

"A jug of wine—a loaf of bread"—he quoted.

"But it isn't a wilderness. And dinner won't be ready for an hour yet. Don't you think a wilderness would have been utterly stupid with his 'thou' beside him singing everlastingly? No, please don't say, 'It would depend on the thou.'"

"Do you sing, Miss Lacharme?"

"A little."

"Please, then, a little. Then I'll answer your question."

"I had rather not just now."

"My answer would be the same in either case. This is living, after the desert and its loneliness. I discovered one thing out there, however, myself. It was a surprise. My way back ancestors must have been pirates."

"Mine grew roses in southern France."

"I am glad they eventually came to America," he said.

"Are you so fond of candy, Mr. Winthrop?"

"No."

"Neither am I."

"I'm glad they came, just the same. I simply can't help it."

"Overland—Mr. Summers—doesn't take life very seriously, does he?" asked Louise.

"Not as seriously as life has taken him at odd times."

"You brought Collie in your car, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"He's much better?"

"Yes. But he's pretty shaky yet. He's a little queer, in fact. As we came up the canyon he asked me to stop the car by the cliff near this end—that place where the sunlight comes through a kind of notch in the west. I thought he was tired of the motion of the car, so we stopped, and he lay back looking at the cliff. Pretty soon the sun shot a long ray past us, and it fairly splattered gold on the canyon wall. Then the shaft of sunlight went out. 'It will shine again,' he said, as if I didn't know that. Collie's a pretty sick man."

Later Winthrop and Louise joined the others at the veranda. Louise excused herself. She searched a long time before she found another rose. This time it was a Colombe bud, full, red and beautiful. She stepped to Louise's window. "Boy!" she called softly.

White and trembling, he stood in the long window looking down at her. "I'm glad you are home again," she said.

He nodded and glanced away.

"Boy," she called again, "catch!"

And she tossed the rose. He caught it and pressed it to his lips.

Evening, placidly content with the warm silence, departed lingeringly.

Boyar, the black pony, shook his head with a silvery jingling of rein chains. His sleek flanks glistened in the moonlight. Louise curbed him gently with hand and voice as he stepped through the wide gateway of the ranch.

At the edge of the Old Meadow the girl dismounted, allowing Boyar to graze at will.

She climbed to the low rounded rock, her crimson, throne of dreams, where she sat with knees gathered to her in her clasped hands. The pony paused in his grazing to lift his head and look at her with gently wondering eyes.

The utter solitude of the place, far above the viewless valley, allowed her thought a horizon impossible at the Moonstone ranch. Alone she faced the grave question of making an unalterable choice. Collie had asked her to marry him. She had evaded direct reply to his direct question. She knew of no good reason why she should marry him. She knew of no better reason why she should not. She thought she was content with being loved. She was, for the moment.

"Got a match, kid?"

Louise raised her head. Some one was afoot on the Old Meadow trail. She could hear the whisper of dried grasses against the boots of the men as another voice replied, "Sure! Here you are." And Louise knew that Collie was one of the men.

About to call, she hesitated, strangely curious as to who the other man might be and why Collie and he should forgether in the Old Meadow at night. "Never mind," mumbled the first speaker. "I thought I wanted to smoke, but I don't. I want to talk first—about the Rose Girl."

(To Be Continued.)

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